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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000898

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

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TAGS: [EG](#) [KPAL](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: SINIORA VIEWS SITUATION PRIOR TO
RESUMPTION OF NATIONAL DIALOGUE

REF: BEIRUT 891

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) In a March 21 meeting with the Ambassador and econoff, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora denied reports that he had asked Terje Roed-Larsen to help him, along with Saudia Arabia and Egypt, negotiate with Syria on Lebanon's behalf. Regarding the national dialogue, Siniora said that Egyptian and Saudi pressure on Syria on the Shebaa Farms and on the presidency was crucial. Siniora said that he would place the pen in Syria's hand and accept whatever boundaries it drew (within reason) for the Shebaa Farms. Siniora mentioned MP Farid el-Khazen as a rumored compromise candidate for president, but doubted its validity based on Michel Aoun's anticipated fury. Siniora said that the national dialogue will continue and MP Saad Hariri will attend despite threats against him. Expressing disappointment at the walkout of two Maronite members of the Electoral Commission, Siniora claimed he had persuaded them to return. At the close of the meeting, Siniora said that he would contemplate the USG proposal to invite Defense Minister Elias Murr and Acting Interior Minister Mohammad Fatfat to Washington to discuss security assistance. End summary.

LARSEN RUMOR FALSE

12. (C) On March 21, the Ambassador and econoff met with Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and his advisers Roula Nouredine and Mohammad Chattah to discuss the current situation and deliver a demarche (reftel). The Ambassador shared Terje Roed-Larsen's claim that Siniora had asked Roed-Larsen to go to Riyadh with him to help negotiate with the Syrians over Shebaa Farms, with Saudis and Egyptians playing a supporting role. The Ambassador, noting his personal reservations about this idea, asked Siniora if this was accurate. An exasperated Siniora replied that this is the third time he has been asked about this story. First the Russian ambassador asked him and then MP Saad Hariri also brought it to his attention. Categorically denying the story, Siniora expressed deep annoyance with this rumor, especially since he had not met with Roed-Larsen since November 2005. He talked to Roed-Larsen on the phone two or three times since, but only to discuss holding another meeting.

EGYPT AND SAUDI ARABIA KEY

13. (C) Turning to the national dialogue scheduled to resume March 22, the Ambassador asked Siniora if he had Egyptian and Saudi support to pressure Syria on the Shebaa Farms issue discussed in the previous sessions of the dialogue. Siniora replied that he puts "everything" on Egypt and Saudi Arabia. They are the key to pressuring Syria to cooperate on Shebaa Farms and on the presidency. Siniora, saying that he has kept Egypt and Saudi Arabia fully briefed throughout the national dialogue, added that he intended to call President Hosni Mubarak and Saudi Prince Saud. Siniora said he also needed Egyptian and Saudi help on disarming the Palestinians. "We are moving solidly forward...but it needs a real push," he explained.

14. (C) Egyptian and Saudi pressure on Syria is also crucial to pushing President Emile Lahoud to resign, according to Siniora. When the Ambassador asked if this would work, Siniora answered that there is no other way. "Lahoud is causing real harm . . . He is asking for something even Hizballah is not asking for," said Siniora referring to Lahoud's recent statement that Hizballah should retain its arms until there is regional Arab-Israeli peace. Removing Lahoud from office is a top priority, and pressure on Syria is crucial to achieving it, according to Siniora.

15. (C) Regarding the upcoming Arab summit in Khartoum, Siniora said that he had not yet decided whether to attend given that President Lahoud will go. Siniora intimated that he thought the benefits outweighed the risks of going. "People can talk to the future of Lebanon, not its past" if Siniora attends the summit. Siniora said that he may not attend the opening session if he has to sit behind Lahoud. But, if he is treated as a head of state, Siniora said he is leaning towards going to Khartoum, in order to have a venue

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to build Arab support for Lebanese positions vis-a-vis Syria, especially regarding the presidency and Shebaa Farms.

FARID EL-KHAZEN?!

16. (C) Siniora said that the price sought by the Syrians on the presidency is to nominate someone that is not antagonistic to Syria. "They are masters of blackmail," he explained. Siniora said that the pro-Syrian names floating around include Michel Edde and Jean Obeid. He added that Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh is no longer being mentioned, possibly because of the arrest of former al-Medina Bank chief Rana Koleilat (who presumably has stories to tell) in Brazil. Siniora said that the newest compromise name being floated is MP Farid el-Khazen. The rumor is that the pro-Aoun el-Khazen's name was suggested to Patriarch Mar Nasrallah Sfeir as a compromise, someone who might be able to garner a consensus. Siniora was not sure of the validity of the rumor given that Michel Aoun would never accept someone from his block being a presidential competitor. "Aoun would kill him," chuckled Siniora. (Note: Whether by coincidence or not, Amal MP Ali Bazzi in a separate meeting with poloff on March 21 also casually brought up the name of Farid el-Khazen as a possible compromise Maronite candidate for president. Bazzi, a U.S. citizen, who speaks in a straight-forward manner, said with a laugh, "...Aoun would probably kill him, but he wouldn't be bad at all." End note.)

PUTTING THE PEN
IN SYRIA'S HAND

17. (C) Siniora clarified the national dialogue agreement on demarcating Shebaa Farms. He said that all participants, including Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, agreed to put their trust in Siniora to draw the borders in negotiations with Syria. Siniora said he intended to meet with the Syrians, put a pen in their hand, and tell them to

draw the borders of the Shebaa Farms showing what falls in Lebanon and what parts lie in Syria. Siniora said he will accept any borders the SARG draws. Chattah interjected that this, of course, would be limited to borders within reason. Chattah admitted that he had thought of scenarios in which Syria drew Lebanon's borders to include much of northern Israel. Siniora said he would not accept this, but was willing to agree to any Syrian borders within reason.

NATIONAL DIALOGUE

18. (C) Turning to the national dialogue, Siniora said that he did not think the discovery of mortar shells near MP Saad Hariri's house would prevent him from attending. Siniora said that the placement of the shells near Qoraytem was a message like the ones given to Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and MP Bahia Hariri, in earlier incidents similar to this one. "It is a message, nothing more. This is the maximum they can do," asserted Siniora without clarifying who "they" were. Siniora and Chattah were encouraged by recent statements by Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, including the 3/20 al-Manar interview, that were relatively moderate and that did not contradict what had been agreed at the national dialogue so far.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION

19. (C) Siniora expressed disappointment at the electoral commission, particularly at the two Maronite members (Ziad Baroud and Michel Tabet) who walked out. "They are not behaving in a serious way," he added. "First they leaked their resignations, then announced their resignations, and then, on the third day, I received their resignations." Siniora said he visited Baroud and Tabet and calmed them down by listening to them for an hour. He believed that they would return to the commission shortly. Siniora said that he did not believe it was Baroud's right to walk out over what appeared to be minor disagreements. Siniora appeared to regret Baroud's participation in the commission, sighing that some people impress you with credentials but then don't behave well once in place.

110. (C) In closing, the Ambassador asked Siniora for his opinion on a possible USG invitation to Defense Minister Ilias Murr and acting Interior Minister Mohammad Fatfat to

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come to Washington discuss security assistance. Siniora (who had earlier opposed inviting Murr alone) said that it was an interesting idea, and that he would think about it.

PALESTINIAN REFUGEES

111. (C) Walking out, Siniora, unprompted, added a positive note, saying that cabinet ministers would soon visit the Palestinian refugee camps and discuss improving health and education. The Ambassador welcomed this step, pointing out the UNRWA traditionally considered Lebanon to be the worst host country for Palestinian refugees. Siniora replied that, under the Syrian occupation, the GOL was never allowed to give any assistance to Palestinian refugees in order to keep the tension going. He said that the ministers' visit to the camps will be the first in about 40 years.

FELTMAN